JACQUES RANCIÈRE’S CONTRIBUTION TO THE ETHICS OF RECOGNITION

In 1965, at the age of twenty-five, Jacques Rancière started his philosophical career with a coup de maître. His name appeared next to the name of Louis Althusser on the cover page of Lire le Capital (Reading Capital), the seminal work by one of the most influential maîtres à penser of the time. However, soon after, Rancière parted company with the master and with orthodox Marxism. This gesture and the book that ensued, La leçon d’Althusser (Althusser’s Lesson), announced what has since been Rancière’s place in contemporary French philosophy: that of an original thinker who has developed a distinctive position that makes it impossible to affiliate him with any of the mainstream philosophical strands. The concepts and arguments Rancière has developed reflect some of the major intuitions of post-1945 French philosophy, but it is impossible adequately to label them with any of the usual tags. He is a thinker deeply influenced by Marx, who has totally rejected Marxist sociology. An existentialist who casts away the notion of self-consciousness. A theorist of postmodern society who rejects Lyotard’s philosophy of language. A theorist of social domination who criticizes Foucault’s definition of power. A sociologist and a historian focusing his interest on the misery of the world, but critical of Bourdieu’s most famous paradigms. A thinker of recognition who rejects the notion of understanding. A Deleuzian who puts the notion of the subject at the center of his political thought. The list goes on. Rancière was out of place in the 70s, when Althusser’s brand of Marxism was the official dogma of French intellec-

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cal philosophy, from the first publication, _La leçon d’Althusser_ (1974) to the final conceptual elaboration of _La mésentente_ (Disagreement) (1995). After this Rancière moved on to aesthetic questions. Seven books have been published since _La mésentente_. Indeed, Rancière has published a book every year since 1995.\(^1\) However, a strong thematic unity keeps all these distinct works together. Rancière’s “system” combines two theoretical concerns. First, it gives an account of social and political domination which is connected with an account of the logic of social and political emancipation. This first concern is rooted in the young Marx and in existentialism. (This may explain the difficult relationship with those authors, like Althusser and his school, who took their cue from the late Marx.) Rancière’s second concern is one that causes problems with post-Nietzschean philosophy, and also with old critical theory. It is the belief, put into practice in every one of Rancière’s political texts, that the role of the philosopher is not to give his/her voice to the silent aspirations of the dominated, but to add his/her voice to theirs, therefore, to hear their voices, rather than interpret them, and to help them resound. Politics in Rancière is fundamentally aesthetic since it sets out to challenge the received perception of social reality, and to offer alternative expressions for a new perception; thus, art accomplishes the same task as politics, namely to reorganize the accepted perceptions of reality.

Rancière’s fundamental political concern is the denial of recognition experienced by the dominated. The purpose of this essay is to offer an account of Rancière’s work as a contribution to the ethics and politics of recognition. By putting this issue at the heart of political theory, Rancière indirectly highlights some of the abstractions of the consensus model used in the theory of deliberative democracy. By opposing the logic of the social to the logic of the political, social identity to political identity, he also helps us discover some problematic features in Axel Honneth’s reliance on processes of identity-building in political struggles. Rancière’s theory of the political subject also poses a serious challenge to some of the tenets of the philosophy of multiculturalism. His assertion of radical equality as the central principle of political theory certainly leaves many questions unanswered. He does not support his political theses with full-fledged sociological, legal, and psychological theories. However, this is not a real shortcoming since his explicit claim is that there is a specific logic of the political that is not derived from social or developmental logics. Indeed his main contribution is to isolate and emphasize the democratic moment in politics and to denounce all reductions to the social.

Rancière gained most of his historical material and theoretical insights while immersed in extensive research into the “archives of the proletarian dream.”\(^2\) The result of this research can be read in his second book, _The
Nights of Labor (1981). This book and La leçon d’Althusser were crucial in the definition and delineation of his political project. I will focus on them first, before analyzing the key concepts of his political thought in relation to the ethics and politics of recognition.

The gesture by which Jacques Rancière broke free from the orthodoxy of Althusserianism, in La leçon d’Althusser, signaled right from the start the constellation of themes that he would continue to pursue in his later works. Interestingly, it also demonstrated the same theoretical concerns that would draw some thinkers of the ethics of recognition away from Habermas. The thread of Rancière’s criticism of Althusser seems at first glance to be unilaterally political. It looks like a typical gauchiste attack on a philosopher that remained within the orthodoxy of Marxist science. It seems that Rancière holds a grudge against Althusser for his ambiguous attitude toward the student movements of the late 60s which culminated in the events of May 1968.

Rancière establishes a genealogy of Althusser’s writings in which the ground force of Althusser’s development is the constant fear of losing his paradoxical position within the Communist Party. His was a marginal position in that it was bereft of any executive power, but a position of extreme intellectual prestige. A crucial effect of his constant tactical maneuvering within the ideological discourse is Althusser’s projection of the division of labor into the relation of praxis and intellectual labor. The famous notion of “coupure épistémologique,” the autonomy of the process of knowledge from processes of praxis, is interpreted by the young Rancière as the theoretical justification of the symbolic power of the “maître à penser” and as a way to secure and defend this position: “across all the texts [of that period], correlative to the denial of any creative capacity of the masses, is drawn a certain figure of theoretical heroicism: if masses can make history, it is because the heroes make the theory of it.” Althusser is portrayed as a guardian of communist orthodoxy and academic purity against the two revolutions that threaten his two intellectual identities: the Maoist revolution in world politics and the students’ rebellion in the French academia. However, it would be unfair to Rancière, and we would be missing something important in our topic, if we were to reduce his first book to a sad example of the odd outbursts of ideological fanaticism that inflamed French intellectual life in the 70s. The personal and political attacks are made on the basis of a serious conceptual objection to Althusser’s epistemology and philosophy of history, an objection which is in fact quite similar to the kind of objections thinkers of recognition have formulated against their own traditions. What Rancière objects to most profoundly in Althusser are his antihumanist, antidemocratic, and antisubjectivist stances, as these three theoretical gestures sever the Marxist heritage from its potential for effective emancipation. Against Althusser’s
criticism of humanism and historicism as categories of bourgeois ideology, even against the grain of many of Marx’s writings, Rancière maintains the humanist heritage of Marxism. This is fundamental to an effective philosophy of emancipation. A philosophy of revolution, which claims that ordinary men and women do not have the ability to change the world in which they are exploited, is in effect a conservative philosophy. The same applies to a philosophy that rejects the categories of subject and genuine social praxis.\(^4\) In effect, in practical, political terms, it is a philosophy that becomes unable effectively to conceptualize emancipation. Finally, a philosophy that rejects the notion of democracy, that is, the radical equality of all individuals, is unable to represent the interests of those who are denied social and political recognition.

The most endearing feature of Rancière’s thought appears already in this brief outline. The crux of his critiques and positive contributions is always the consideration of the practical effects, in reality, of action and discourse. Indeed, one consequence of this attitude is that discourse is to be approached as a kind of practical interaction. Rancière’s philosophy could be described as methodological or practical materialism. To conceive of truth in terms of a dialectic of illusion and disillusionment, of ideology and science, is to remain within an idealist theory of discourse that is, ultimately, a theory of representation. A consistent materialism must not limit itself to a materialistic epistemology. It has to be materialistic all the way, in its ontology, in its principles and its methods, in its philosophy of history, in its sociology and its poetics, and finally in its model for a good life. It must believe in the material nature and the material effect of language and discourse. It must approach social and political reality in terms of material, that is practical, effective, modes of domination and exploitation, and not limit itself to the denunciation of the ideological reproduction of underlying relations of production. Consequently it cannot reduce the fight against those relations of domination to forms of alienated consciousness. To take one example: against the classic denunciation of the ideology of human rights, Rancière recalls that in fact, “when the bourgeois law erases the class differences, it is not out of natural dissimulation, or through the sole evolution of the relations of production, it is because workers have forced it to do so.”\(^5\) A serious study of the history of class relations shows that the exploiting minority has always tried to justify its position over the lower classes through the discourse of natural superiority. The concept of universal equality had to be argued, and fought for, by working and rebelling subjects. To deny the existence and relevance of these fights is to vindicate the bourgeois division of humanity into those who can speak and act meaningfully and those whose speech and praxis are mere sound and violence.
Two important correlated principles accompany this fundamental position. The first is a methodological consequence. The division of labor that keeps apart the intellectual’s science and ordinary consciousness is denounced as a counterproductive mistake that perpetuates the metaphysics of representation and therefore traditional relations of domination. This means that the analysis of domination can no longer be carried out from above or behind the back of the exploited but has to be carried out immanently, in the exploited’s own words and actions. For Rancière, the hermeneutics of the social and political fields demand that the observer take the position of a participant. The same can be expressed differently, starting from a positive basis. The fundamental principle of politics is the radical equality of all individuals. If this principle is taken seriously, in other words, if this principle is to be an effective, practical, principle, it must be transformed from a political imperative into a methodological rule, that is, the rule that all individuals have the equal ability to express and defend their own rights. The confiscation of speech is the beginning of exploitation. The end of exploitation demands that speech be given back to the exploited. The role of the intellectual is not to formulate on behalf of the exploited masses what is inaccessible to their consciousness, to educate and/or lead them. It is to help them express their own experience, their thoughts, and their desires for recognition, by helping to pull down the barriers that exclude their speech from the authorized forms of speech. In fact, to learn about domination and emancipation, the intellectual will have to be taught by those who suffer and rebel. This is a point where Rancière meets one important aspect in the theory of recognition. The methodological rule that social hermeneutics be conducted from the participant’s point of view echoes one of Habermas’s essential tenets. Habermas has repeatedly highlighted the confusion in the Weberian model of sociological understanding, which stems from his inability to relate the pole of interpretation to the pole of explanation. Habermas’s project is an attempt to draw out a revised social hermeneutics that would synthesize both methodological procedures and their own theoretical demands. Also, one of the fundamental points in Honneth’s criticism of Habermas is the deficiency of Habermas’s model in practically accounting for the moral experience of denial of recognition. The theoretical demand is for the inclusion of the perspective of the exploited.

The second correlated principle that already appears in this first book is one that Rancière later calls “la logique du tort,” the logic of the wrong or the logic of the tort. This logic is not fully sketched in La leçon d’Althusser, but it is already at play. In formal terms, it is a logic based on the dialectical articulation of universality and particularity within the polis. It is the problematic combination of the two structural features of the political: the radical univer-
sality of equality versus the hierarchy created by socioeconomic difference. In La leçon, this logic appears only in the specific context of a critique of the mandarins, the typical 1968 motto of the abolition of relations of power between teacher and student. It appears much more briefly in the context of a revision of the history of the workers’ movement.

As we can see, Rancière’s example shows that one unexpected consequence of the Maoist critique of orthodox Marxism in France was a strong rejection of the death of the subject. This death was perpetrated and announced in all corners of Parisian intellectual life in the late 60s, and it gave a strong thematic community to otherwise very different groups, from the Marxists to the structuralists, the Nietzscheans to the Heideggerians. In France today, at a time when all the schools that perpetrated that murder are overshadowed by the return to Kant and the flight into liberalism, the strand that is still able to offer a valuable dissenting voice is the heritage of this Maoist critique of Marxism, as symbolized by Jacques Rancière and Alain Badiou. Their emphasis on processes of subjectivation and praxis enables their works to withstand the challenge of changing times.

Rancière did not leave this critique at the abstract level of academic debate. Having denounced the hypocrisy of classic Althusserianism for shying away from the real, practical consequence of political theory, he applied practically his hermeneutic rule by undertaking a long bibliographical research into the “archives of the proletarian dream,” in order to uncover the forgotten voices of nineteenth-century workers who had called for emancipation. Rancière coherently chose a most significant example of social rebellion and emancipation in the utopian movements in France from the aftermath of the July Revolution of 1830 until the 1848 Revolution. Against classical and Marxist sociology, against the classical methods of historians, Rancière was careful to center his research on one very specific type of worker, and not those that fit the preconceived clichés of proletarian folklore or the classic topoi of the rebelling workers. For Rancière, the usual focus by historiography on the heroic figures of workers resisting as workers only reinforces the division of labor between the working classes and the idle classes that can devote their free time to intellectual tasks. Instead, he followed the dreams and thoughts of these men and women who attempted to conceptualize in theory, or express in literary works, the moral, intellectual, social, aesthetic, and political experiences of the exploited. These were individuals twice excluded from social integration: first as renegades of their own class, second as nonbourgeois daring to undertake occupations reserved for the bourgeois. In the lives and words of these proletarian philosophers and poets, the logic of the tort is perfectly embodied, since they voiced the universal claim for equality as singular voices, as true examples of political sub-
jects. They were the representatives of the working classes against the exploiting minority, and as such they defended the rights of the universal against the particular privileges of domination. But they could only act as the representatives of the universal cause because they had somehow left it, as idle proletarians, proletarians during the day and idle thinkers at night. This is an illustration of Rancière’s ontological choice of focusing on paradoxical processes of subjectivation, against the generalization and substantialization of social sciences. By reducing all the individual histories of the workers’ movement to general features of one anonymous, collective identity, the identity of a class, historians and sociologists attach the proletarians to an essence and a destiny. The question of whether or not this identity underlies a history of emancipation becomes irrelevant in view of the overriding practical, political consequence of such reduction. In the end, the proletarians are unable to free themselves by themselves. As the etymology of the word tort tells us, Rancière’s logic, the logic of the tort, is twisted logic. It is not dialectical logic leading to higher synthesis. As the embodiment of that logic, proletarian philosophers and poets mostly had doomed fates; they were rejected by all the forces of the social field. But their dreams of emancipation reveal much about the logic of domination and the fight against it.

Having engaged directly with the voice of the dominated, Rancière was then able to gather all the philosophical content of his previous books into a more explicit and systematic exposition, which lays out in full detail his theory of recognition and social and political integration. The central work where he fully explains the logic of the tort is *La mésentente*, as well as a series of key articles published as a book in *Aux bords du politique* (On the Shores of Politics) (1998, second edition). To demonstrate the contribution of Rancière to the ethics of recognition, one must understand the fundamentals of this logic.

Rancière’s political philosophy and ontology are structured by a paradoxical logic. His thesis is that politics (*la politique*) is opposed in essence to philosophy, or that there is no such thing as political philosophy. It is not false to say that Rancière’s political philosophy attempts to prove that political philosophy is a logical impossibility.

Typically, when turning its attention to the organization of the polis, philosophy does so with the resources of rationality as a means of critically analyzing existing communities and normatively establishing principles, rules of functioning, and so on, of what is in essence a political community, a polis. Philosophy attends to political matters as it does with all other matters. It presupposes that there are rational ways of accounting for the existence, structuring, and functioning of political communities. This in turn means that there are underlying logical or ontological principles that give rational justifi-
cation for the social and political order. The presupposition of the existence of an *arkhe*, an underlying principle, of the political community implies that there are good reasons for linking certain groups of individuals with certain political functions within the polis. In other words, philosophy poses one or several principles of the community by somehow articulating the political to the social. Political philosophy has always been about giving reason for the specific link between individuals as citizens, and between the community as a whole and the particular individuals. Even in the liberal tradition, the ultimate reason behind the structural principle of the community is a certain relation to a social order analytically reduced to atomistic individuals. However, the ultimate consequence of this rationalistic approach to the science of the polis, is the denial of the polis as the product of its citizens’ activity. If the task of political philosophy is indeed to find a rational justification for the political order that is based on a state of the social order, all this amounts to is a justification of social hierarchy, and a justification of the projection of this hierarchy into the political; in other words, a justification of domination. By defining its object in relation to social hierarchy, political philosophy ends up defining a nonpolitical object. This is evident in the classical metaphors of the community as an organism, a geometrical order, a well-oiled machine, or a Leviathan.

Rancière sets out to develop a thinking that opposes this movement by which the political moment is ejected out of political thinking, a thinking that encapsulates the original logic or the specific ontology of the political. To do that, one must rupture the traditional relation between the social and the political and oppose them. The social field is always the field of hierarchy and domination, the absence and the ultimate denial of an independent logical or ontological status of the political. Its basic logic is that of inequality. The structure that regulates the articulation and good functioning of that field, Rancière calls the police, *la police*, in reference to the broad, nonaxiological sense of the term in eighteenth-century French political economy (the same sense that can be found in the Hegelian Polizei). In essence, *la police* is oligarchic. On the other hand, the political works on the basis of the opposite principle, that of radical equality, the equality of anyone with anyone. *La politique* is therefore in essence democratic. Rancière’s political thinking rests upon this opposition.13 I will now relate some of the arguments put forward by Rancière on the basis of this opposition.

The social does not found the political; rather, the political notion founds the social. The condition of possibility of inequality is equality. The reason Rancière gives for this has a strong resemblance to the logic of the master/servant relationship in Hegel. The masters demand to be recognized as masters by those they dominate. However, for this recognition of inequality to be
possible, the masters must recognize the ability of the dominated to recognize at all. Underneath the existence of social hierarchy, there lies the more fundamental recognition of pure, ontological equality.

The same can be expressed in linguistic-pragmatic terms. Understanding has contradictory layers of pragmatic meaning that are not well accounted for by Habermas. In society, to understand is to understand a problem and also to understand an order. Understanding is mostly understanding the orders of those who understand the problems. This understanding of orders is therefore, at this level of social domination, the denial of understanding as communicative action. One telos of language is understanding, but it is understanding as denial of intersubjectivity, through the denial of the capacity of those who understand only too well the language of domination. However, when those who understand the problems assume that the rest only have to understand their orders, they must also assume that they understand, and therefore they implicitly recognize that the understanding of orders hides the possibility of a communicative reciprocal understanding.

To continue to present the relation of the political to the social in substantialist terms, however, is still wrong. Indeed it is the very logic that groups individuals and gives them institutional or “political” power in accordance with what they are sociologically, the fundamental root of the process of inequality, in reality and in thought. This is where the logic of the tort, the logic of the wrong, develops. As the social hierarchical order is made possible by the more radical ontological equality, this social order must be called both wrong and wrung. It gives birth to a tort, a moral tort, and a logical or ontological torsion, a logical or ontological twisting, or wringing. The social order is morally wrong as it groups individuals into a dominating minority and dominated majority as a matter of course when this, in fact, presupposes the bracketing of all domination. But this moral wrongness is just the apparent side of the ontological “wrungness” of that order. The social order is wrung in that it supposes that one is not equal to one in the community, when the only possible way of defining one is by posing that one = one. The social order is wrung because it must arrive at ontological inequality since hierarchy is its basic arkhe, while at the same time this inequality is only logically possible on the basis of radical equality.

If we only had the head-on opposition between la police and la politique, the possibility of political activity and political thinking would be nonexistent. Thus, we need a third term to mediate between the two. This mediation, however, must not be thought of as a synthesis, since the logic of the tort is decidedly nondialectical. Rancière calls this third term le politique, and defines it as the place where la police and la politique meet. Here struggle takes place between the two diverging, yet related principles. Put in abstract
formal terms, this struggle consists in the verification of radical equality in any given system of inequality. Or expressed differently, it consists in highlighting the wrongness and “wrungness” of a social order that is otherwise presented as naturally ordered. It therefore identifies victims of the tort and those who perpetrate the tort. In simple words, le politique is always a demand for justice. As Rancière says, class struggle is not behind the political as the Marxists claim, it is the political.17

Le politique is not a fight for the political capacity of categories or attributes. It is a pragmatic verification (i.e., a verification in practice and in speech that is always limited to a situation) of the universality of equality and therefore a denunciation of the wrongness and “wrungness” of a social order.18 It opposes the unequal principle of domination to the universal principal of equality in a particular pragmatic scene. For example, it confronts the discourse of the bourgeois denying the workers the right to express their rights with the universalistic discourse of the declaration of human rights, and it demands that this particular “wrungness” be redressed. This can only happen if the first discourse is made compatible with the second. The pragmatic political fight aims at pragmatic outcomes and it is fought in pragmatic terms. The political struggle can therefore be defined as a fight for rights, but only if one remembers that the newly acquired rights are just one expression of a more fundamental new dimension of recognition of equality, and that the fundamental torsion of the social order can never be fully redressed. This is another point where Rancière’s political thought is close in spirit to the program of the ethics of recognition, and even to Habermas’s analysis of political struggles in contemporary democracies. In all three cases, recognition can only be achieved through struggles for recognition. The difference between the models lies in the different conceptual lines that divide the political from the nonpolitical. In Honneth and other theorists of recognition, any genuine struggle for the recognition of a valid feature of identity involves a potential political content. In Habermas the line runs between the private preinstitutional sphere and the public institutionalized sphere. Rancière’s model is more plastic. Any struggle that seeks to vindicate the universal equality of speakers denied their right to express their voice is a political struggle. This means that some struggles commonly viewed as political are in fact all about the assertion of a particular social identity and are therefore antipolitical, while some struggles rooted in the private sphere might have political meaning if they highlight a particular tort perpetrated against some individuals. A strike can be antipolitical while the demands of women in their homes can be political. The political is not attached to a sphere but to a kind of speech.
The application of the antiontological logic to the political fight defines antiontological subjects. The subjects that engage in the political fight as defined above do not do so on account of their identity. They do so on account of their being in between two or more identities. The political subject is defined sociologically as both dominated and democratically as equal. This contradictory nature is what makes it possible as a political subject. It exists as such when it engages in the pragmatic personification of that paradoxical, or paratactical identity that is nonidentical. It is a paratactical identity since it defines subjects as both being and not being. This explains why the political subject can, or even must, claim an identity it does not have as an ontological subject. For instance, it can claim to be a proletarian without being a worker, or conversely to be a poet without being a bourgeois. Rancière gives political meaning to the 1968 catchphrase: “nous sommes tous des Juifs allemands” (“we are all German Jews”). In his later articles, Rancière bemoans the fact that today one can no longer claim that one is, say, a woman victim of prejudice, if one is not a woman. He sees this contemporary impossibility as the symptom of the world of postdemocracy, in which the political has been finally ejected and political subjectivation made finally impossible, where the fight for emancipation has been reduced to the fight for identity. Rancière opposes strongly emancipatory movements that are based on identity claims to movements based on universality claims, in the nonontological sense defined above. In that he remains very much within the universalistic French tradition.

The pragmatic verification of equality creates situations of speech and dialogue which did not exist previously. This is because the logic of the tort destabilizes and shortcuts the whole power structure of the social order. The logic of the tort is a logic that addresses the denial of recognition. This denial is the denial of the ability and right of dominated individuals to engage in dialogue with the dominating classes. By holding firm to the principle of universal equality, political subjects reshape the whole social situation. They make themselves visible as speaking subjects where previously the dominating classes only perceived the noise of the alienated or rebelling individuals, and they make the objects of their recrimination visible as worthy objects of dialogue. Against the substantialist logic that has dominated the definitions and procedures of political philosophy, Rancière argues that the political in its specificity is in fact a form of aesthetics, in that it produces a rearrangement of social reality for a refreshed perception, where bodies and voices that were neither seen nor heard can be included in a communicative context. Therefore, the understanding aimed at in a genuine political situation always has, as a condition of possibility, a more fundamental misunderstanding or disagree-
Indeed the political, as such, attempts to create scenes of dialogue which did not exist, but this polemic irruption of political speakers by definition must oppose, and impose itself, against all those that deny the exploited speakers the right to speak and the existence of the object of their recrimination. Rancière criticizes the Habermasian model for presupposing unproblematically situations of dialogue as given and the participants to the dialogue as preexisting subjects recognized by all as valid speakers. Quite the opposite is the case. The very contested object of political conflict is precisely the existence of a situation of speech and the identity of the valid participants in that situation. The fight of the dominated individuals consists in appearing as worthy speakers and in making the situation of speech visible. This is why Rancière calls these situations of dialogue “polemic scenes” and makes la mésentente, the conflict over the understanding of the whole situation of speech, the founding event of political communities. Political subjects are created within a wrung situation, a situation of tort, and through their effort to redress it. Since political subjects do not exist as such before the political fight has started, it is impossible to claim that the telos of language, in the political context, is understanding. Moreover, since the logics of radical equality and social inequality are always both incommensurable and interrelated, the treatment of the litigation is indefinite. There can be no end to the history of emancipation.

Rancière’s political thinking is in many respects similar to the ethics and politics of recognition, despite their very different traditions. As in Honneth and Hegel, the subject’s identity depends on a conflicting interrelation with others where the dimension of struggle is crucial for the subject’s development. In both cases, initial fundamental equality is denied by subjects asserting themselves as particular. The struggle for recognition is about reinstating the basis of equality. In all cases, inequality is made possible by an underlying equality. Language is the medium in which the denial of recognition becomes manifest and through which the struggle for recognition is often fought. Against the unproblematic notion of understanding in Habermas, theorists of recognition and Rancière both think of recognition as the result of struggle. This struggle is infinite in its structure, since the very development of the self consists in feeling unrecognized in particular intersubjective communities and in struggling to assert its nonrecognized individual features, thereby enlarging the content of consciousness in itself and the others. However, the logic of recognition also gives normative guidelines, which make it possible to differentiate critically between societal and political models and to give historical accounts of social development in terms of a widening of moral consciousness within a community (Honneth and Siep). Rancière also acknowledges the notion of moral and historical progress in the recognition
of minorities and their rights. Therefore, he escapes the criticism leveled by Habermas at Foucault’s notion of power; namely, that it dissolves all normative and differentiating judgments. Like Honneth and Hegel, Rancière stresses the importance of the law in anchoring the recognition of superior levels of universality and equality within a community.

However, Rancière’s position also enables us to highlight some of the shortcomings of the ethics of recognition. The logic of the tort is what differentiates Rancière’s thought specifically from the tradition of recognition and it implies as a consequence a different approach to relations of domination and exploitation.

Proponents of the ethics of recognition, although they all distance themselves from Hegel in some way or another, continue to think of recognition in basically idealistic terms, because what they keep from Hegel is a dialectic understanding of intersubjective structures. For all these writers, Habermas included, the groundbreaking contribution made by Hegel to moral and political philosophy is, first, the drawing out of a formal or logical scheme of recognition, and, second, the fleshing out of this program in his theory of Sittlichkeit. They differ on their assessments of the realization of this program, but they all agree that the logic of intersubjectivity, that can be found in the early Jena writings or in the Phenomenology, provides a valid starting point for any account of personal identity in relation to others. This logic is perfectly summarized by Honneth at the beginning of Struggle for Recognition: a subject knows that it is recognized by another subject in some of its abilities or attributes and this constitutes a first form of community. This community enables the subject to get to know some other aspects of its own particularity, since it has developed more aspects of its own identity. However, these aspects are still ignored by the others, and the subject must launch into a new struggle to have these new aspects recognized, and so on. This is a powerful model because it provides a coherent account of the formation of communities and of self-consciousness as interrelated processes, as processes conditioned by each other. Eventually, the I can only relate to itself through other You’s and through the We, but the We is made possible only by the relation of I’s to themselves and to You’s.

However, Honneth is soon obliged to use the notion of reconciliation (Versöhnung). Processes of recognition in the ethics of recognition are always thought of as processes toward reconciliation. The scission between subjects is superceded by a widening of self-representation and of the representation of others, which is supposed to take the selves back to a situation of commonality, to restore the communal, communicative context. Even if these processes take the subjects to higher degrees of self-representation and to higher degrees of communicative life, the formal logic remains within the
framework of Spirit as a return, a Rückkehr, to itself. The logical Rückkehr is only the formal expression of the moral/social notion of reconciliation. Recognition understood in this interpretation of the Hegelian framework remains the path toward reconciliation, the return of Spirit to itself through the negative.

That reconciliation is religious and metaphysical. In the 1802 System der Sittlichkeit, which Honneth uses as the best example of the Hegelian scheme for intersubjectivity, the political is presented as the sphere where the first two reconciliations of the family and of the sphere of the law are tied together into a superior reconciliation that unites the emotive side of the family to the universal, abstract side of the law. This ultimate sphere, however, which hosts the ultimate reconciliation, needs an “absolute government” to be made possible and functioning. The reason for this is that the circles of nonrecognized difference need to be closed eventually if partial recognition is to end up in true reconciliation. But this “absolute government” that closes the circle of consecutive struggles for recognition, is explicitly defined by Hegel as “the appearance of God.” Although Hegel’s speculative logic changed from this early text to the later Jena writings, the teleological, metaphysical foundation of recognition was present as a necessary requisite and it remained unchanged until the mature system.

The problem that the thinkers of the ethics of recognition are faced with is therefore a particular feature of the greater problem of the use of Hegel in a nonmetaphysical age. Of course, they are well aware of this and they take it into account in their revised application of Hegel’s theory of recognition. Indeed the whole Habermasian project could be described as an attempt at a nonmetaphysical renewal of Hegelian Sittlichkeit. But I would argue that, despite this awareness, the thinkers of recognition retain the Hegelian scheme of a struggle for recognition as leading toward greater degrees of reconciliation. Thus, they retain some of the problematic consequences of Hegel’s idealistic model. Rancière helps us respond to exactly this problem.

Two crucial aspects of the Hegelian shortcoming are the treatment of conflict and the treatment of domination. It is striking to note that in all his writings on ethical life, from the early Jena texts to the Philosophy of Right, Hegel always kept the same theoretical place for the treatment of crime and unethical behavior in general; namely, in the early, more abstract phases leading to, but separate from, the full ethical life. A theory of conflict within the interpersonal, social, and political fields cannot receive full systematic treatment in the synthetic parts of the ethical construct, since they are based on the assumption that they somehow reflect the fundamental metaphysical principle of return to a reconciled subjectivity. Equally, in all the authors that can be included in the ethics of recognition, the place of conflict and struggle is
always a circumscribed one. Struggle is defined as only a transitory phase leading to higher reconciliation. From the outset, it is minimized through the teleological logic of reconciliation. Both the outbreak and the overcoming of struggle for recognition are defined as necessary structural correlata of self-definition through others, but as correlata only, which do not warrant specific analysis. Therefore it is possible to claim that despite its key role in leading from one stage of identity to another, struggle has no real, structural autonomy within the logic of communicative integration. Struggle is in the end removed from the different fields considered, in favor of pacified visions of these fields. This criticism which can be leveled with good reason at Habermas also applies, to my mind, to his followers and opponents who try to capitalize on the struggle for recognition. All of them present models in which the moment of struggle is downplayed to a moment of mediation, essential perhaps in the entire dialectical progress, but secondary to the telos of communication, and therefore in the end superseded by the achievement of that telos. Domination is just a sad fact that might prompt the struggle for recognition but in the end does not require a special analysis. It is treated as just the pathology of the personal, social, and political worlds.

The appeal of Rancière’s political writings lies in the fact that it is a type of ethics of recognition, but one that also deals seriously with the phenomena of domination and exploitation, putting them at the conceptual heart of theory. Rancière does not operate with a dialectical, teleological logic. In his logic, the positive and the negative are interconnected and reciprocally condition each other. In a sense, it is closer to the spirit of Hegelian dialectic than its heirs apparent, in that it puts alienation and scission at the heart of every (would-be) reconciled moment. It is a logic that truly gives the negative its full power. What makes this logic depart from Hegel is its refusal to assume the metaphysical edge of dialectics. The consequence is a suspensive logic, that is, a logic where difference is constantly called to disrupt the effects of identity and identification, without being assigned as a determination, in the subject, in the social field, and in the political.

Understanding can be thought of as the telos of language and the basis for all social interactions. At the heart of living together is the fundamental sharing of the same language and the communal life it supports and expresses. But this life and this language are always inextricably intertwined with the language and the world of separation. Rancière marks this by positing, against the logic of the social order, his logic of equality, which can be summarized in the double, contradictory term, partager, which means both to share and to separate (i.e., to divide). Those who struggle for recognition are those who manifest the fundamental commonality of the shared life, but they can only do so in the constant confrontation with the logic that denies this
commonality. Against Habermas’s idealized view which takes the possibility of dialogue and understanding for granted at the transcendental level, Rancière insists that, at this very level, the object of dialogue is nothing but the very possibility of dialogue, since some of the partners are not recognized as valid speakers by the others. Thus, understanding can only be reached through misunderstanding.

Political recognition therefore is not to be thought of in the logic of self-consciousness and the formation of personal, social, or cultural identity. The self that emerges in the struggle for recognition is indeed a subject but a split or ‘suspensive’ subject. The suspensive nature of the subject results from the confrontation between the two logics. Political subjects emerge when the hierarchical order of society is questioned on the basis of radical equality. Social hierarchy orders beings according to their natural abilities. It is disrupted by individuals or communities of individuals holding firm on the fundamental notion that all beings are equal. When they challenge and disrupt the organizational principle of society, these individuals make themselves visible as social partners, they make their voices heard as logos. They reconfigure the field of experience and appear as subjects. Obviously, the disruptive subjects could not achieve the reconfiguration of the field of communal experience in the same ontological, organized, hierarchical manner that social configuration is achieved. They must retain their disruptive status. They appear as subjects only in the pragmatic reconfiguration of the field of experience, through the disruption of the ontology of the social order. They appear here and now as subjects of word and action, but they are not ontological entities. The subject that emerges in the struggle against the tort is itself torn; it is a political identity that retains the social difference, and is therefore the true identity of identity and difference. This is an antiontological identity that is nonontological because it proclaims to be different from ontological difference. From Rancière’s perspective, it appears paradoxical that a theorist of recognition like Honneth should denounce the paradigm of the monology of spirit in the mature Hegel while himself adopting a philosophy of consciousness in his grammar of social conflict, whereby the aim of recognition is the formation of a reconciled self. By contrast, Rancière seems very close to the spirit of Hegelian logic, which places otherness at the heart of identity.

This aspect of Rancière’s thought provides the strongest challenge to Honneth’s ethics. If the social order is inevitably constituted as a hierarchical structure, there is great danger in the attempt to define the struggle for recognition in terms of a struggle for the recognition of the individual’s contribution to society, as Honneth does. Ultimately, this recognition only achieves the conservation of a social order that is structurally based on inequality. By focusing on the subjects’ identity and by defining identities in strict social
intersubjective terms, the ethics of recognition turn out to be a kind of sociologism that is unable to provide the theoretical basis for a radical critique of the social system. Once workers have achieved recognition of their social contribution as workers, what they have in fact achieved is symmetrically the recognition of their masters as masters, and the whole power structure has been reaffirmed and reinstated as it is. Against the politics and ethics that focus on the identity, the culture and the ethos of the dominated classes, Rancière draws out his politics of subjectivation. Politics cannot be based on the social hierarchy. Politics is the theoretical and practical assertion of absolute equality and it must radically break with the social order.

Rancière’s thinking is therefore decidedly antisociological. Not only does it oppose radically the community as a socioeconomic mechanism to the community as a political imperative, but also, as a methodological consequence, it refuses to link political theory to the results of sociological research. As we saw, the paradigmatic experiences he based his political thinking on are not those moments where workers fought for their rights as a group, or those cultural achievements that are supposed to express the ethos and consciousness of a whole “class.” Instead, Rancière’s paradigm is to be found in the workers who transgressed and subverted the order of things, by claiming the right to be poets, playwrights, philosophers, and so on, that is, the right to have a meaningful voice beyond the constraints of their social destiny.

For Rancière, the political expression of emancipation is democracy, the basic political equality of anyone with anyone, but the regimes that late capitalism has created in the Western world do not correspond in essence to egalitarian democracy, even if they tend to secure individual rights, since they are based on an ontology of the social order that denies the logic of politics. Our democratic times are the times of postdemocracy. The reigns of the experts, social scientists, and public relation consultants signal that somehow philosophers and governments have successfully achieved the end of politics.

And yet Rancière’s philosophy is not another version of postmodernist wisdom either. The motto of the end of politics is just as illusionary as the enlightenment credo and for the same reason, namely the obliteration of the polemic foundation of the political. The whole fifth chapter of La mésentente, “Démocratie ou consensus” (pp. 135-65), is a subtle articulation of two apparently contradictory imperatives. It rejects the optimistic vision of Western liberalism, the Etat de droit, the Rechtsstaat, as the final and rational stage in political evolution, but without resorting to Marxist or poststructuralist suspicion, and by giving due recognition to the democratic advances brought about by two centuries of political struggles within a state framework. This articulation is made possible by Rancière’s key notion of
“inscription.” Democratic advances, new rights, are institutionalized. As such they can be both victories for democracy, true political (politiques) moments, but also, as institutionalized moments, elements integrated in the police system, which denies their political value. The history of democratic rights is not that of a cumulative acquisition toward the telos of communicative transparency, but a history of singular solutions to the dialectic of equality and inequality, a series of locally situated inscriptions of equality into the realm of inequality. This change of perspective allows for an original critical perspective on societies where human rights have been secured, a perspective that is not established by measuring the gap between social reality and the ideal intersubjective model, but by detecting the points where the logic of socioeconomic rationality twists the egalitarian imperative. Those historical inscriptions of equality within inequality can become ossified and lose their emancipatory inspiration, but they can also be reclaimed at any time by new struggles as references or principles. They can be reinscribed in new contexts, reinterpreted, rewritten, and so on. There is therefore an essential link between memory, history, and democracy. Democratic struggles always occur as reiterations of previous inscriptions of equality.

In sum, Rancière’s position is that of a critical participant in the ethics of recognition, who provides a particularly inventive and coherent way of dealing with the major problem of contemporary philosophy, the status of otherness. Against the optimism of all those who return to Kant and the visions of Enlightenment, he reminds us of the irreducible fact that human community is structurally based on domination and exploitation. But he also gives us the tools for understanding struggle for recognition as the other irreducible fact of human community. His supple theory of the pragmatic verification of equality makes it well adapted to understand and analyze contemporary social, political, and cultural struggles. Rancière’s original thinking has opened up a new direction in the tradition of the philosophy of recognition that is well worth pursuing.

NOTES

1. Jacques Rancière’s writings to date are as follows:
   La leçon d’Althusser (Paris: Gallimard, 1974). Quoted as La leçon.


3. See the second chapter of *La leçon*.

4. *La leçon*, 176. Rancière shows that even if Marx did not focus theoretically on the notion of the subject, he never lost sight of it in the practical outcomes of his theoretical praxis. The subject is “the point that makes possible the very aims of science.”

5. *La leçon*, 163.


10. See the powerful first chapter of *La nuit*, particularly 21-40.

11. In theories of moral education, social recognition, and political emancipation in *La nuit* and *Le philosophe et ses pauvres*; in theories of intellectual emancipation in *Le maître ignorant*. In *Le philosophe plébéien*, Rancière presents the writings of one such representative life: that of the philosopher/carpenter Gabriel Gauny.

12. “...as those who had understood, they no longer belong to a world to which, on the other hand, they must continually return, as workers or apostles” (*La nuit*, 207).

13. From *tortus*, past participle of the Latin verb *torquere*: twisted, distorted, the wrong way.

14. See the tragic fate of the Icarians, in the last chapter of *La nuit*, 356-440.

15. *La mésentente*, chap. 2. For a clear delineation of the three notions (*la politique*, *la police*, and *le politique*), see *Aux bords*, 83-85.


21. See more particularly La mésentente, 88-89, where Rancière confronts his own notion of community to the Kantian universality without concept of the third Critique. Rancière’s later works on poetics and aesthetics continue to question the specific aesthetics created by the logic of democracy. See the end of the 1993 article “L’inadmissible,” reprinted in Aux bords, 138-47, which links the power of literature to the democratic principle. See also his controversial “republican” reading of Mallarmé: Mallarmé, la politique de la sirène (Paris: Hachette, 1996). In the last chapter of Les noms de l’histoire (Paris: Seuil, 1990), Rancière analyzes further his theory that literature and democracy share essential features. The two books published in 1998, La parole muette (Paris: Hachette, 1998) and La chair des mots (Paris: Galilée, 1998) both apply Rancière’s key notion of “suspensive” subjects, the failure of full overlapping between words and things, body and speech, to the theory of literature.

22. Rancière opposes “la mésentente” to “la méconnaissance” (failure to recognize), “le malentendu” (misunderstanding/misapprehension), and “le différend” (difference/disagreement). See La mésentente, 12-14.

23. The third chapter of La mésentente is dedicated to this critique.

24. See the last chapter in Honneth, Kampf um Anerkennung. Zur moralischen Grammatik sozialer Konflikte (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Taschenbuch, 1994), 272-86. Quoted as Kampf. See also Ludwig Siep, Anerkennung als Prinzip der praktischen Philosophie (Freiburg: Alber Verlag, 1979), 278-98. Quoted as Anerkennung.


27. As Habermas himself defines it in his Philosophical Discourse of Modernity.


29. Le philosophe et ses pauvres, 239-89. The last part of his The Philosopher and His Poor is a virulent critique of Bourdieu’s theory of education.

30. At the end of La mésentente, Rancière highlights the paradoxes of the postdemocratic age. It is an age which views itself as having finally abandoned the polemical understanding of politics for a conception of democracy as a process toward consensus, a conception supposed to spread universally thanks to its rational superiority. Unfortunately, this optimistic vision of politics spreads itself at the same time as the multiplication of wars and terrorist activities based on identity claims, and the increasing rejection of alien populations by Western societies. For Rancière these phenomena are linked because they belong to a time when the triumph of the sociological understanding of politics has made the symbolic identification with others impossible. In the full immanence of the social body, every one is a self and a self can be no other. In a sense, Rancière’s philosophy of history, his theory of postdemocracy, could therefore be qualified as a kind of pessimistic postmodernism. However, La mésentente explicitly presents the theses on the political as being still valid in the postdemocratic age, and in effect most of the texts of Aux bords du politique relate his definition of the political to struggles in contemporary France, like the 1968 students’ strike, the debate over immigration, the 1988 presidential elections, and so on.


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